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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCOR](#) [KJUS](#) [PREL](#) [RO](#)

SUBJECT: LASZLO TOKES CHALLENGES UDMR LEADERSHIP AND STRUCTURE

REF: BUCHAREST 0777

Classified By: Polcouns Theodore Tanoue for 1.4 (B) & (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Romania's ethnic Hungarian party (UDMR), the Liberals' coalition partner government, risks failing to meet the five percent electoral threshold in upcoming elections, starting with this fall's European Parliamentary race. The candidacy of controversial Bishop Laszlo Tokes could divide the ethnic Hungarian vote if he runs as an independent in the Euro-Parliamentary elections. The UDMR leadership is seeking to maintain its presence on the political scene by attempting to co-opt Tokes and other rival voices and by attempting to convince ethnic Hungarians that UDMR remains the only party that can advance ethnic Hungarian interests on the national stage. End summary.

¶2. (C) Reformed Bishop Laszlo Tokes, a controversial figure who played a key role in the 1989 uprising in Timisoara against Ceausescu, is emerging as a serious challenger to the leadership of Romania's minority Hungarian party (UDMR). Tokes collected 137,000 signatures early this year to become Romania's only independent candidate in the upcoming European Parliamentary elections. By mounting an independent campaign, Tokes may split the ethnic Hungarian vote, confronting the UDMR with the likelihood of falling short of the five percent electoral threshold and of possibly removing all ethnic Hungarian representation should his own campaign falter.

¶3. (C) Tokes' campaign manager, Zsolt Szilagyi, told PolCouns August 2 that the big question was whether Tokes should accept UDMR leader Bela Marko's July 30 offer of a place on the UDMR's list or campaign independently. He said Marko had refused Tokes' earlier proposal for a joint list last October, but that following corruption investigations against prominent UDMR politicians (including Marko) and the failed referendum to impeach President Basescu, a weakened UDMR now needed all of the ethnic Hungarian votes it could gather. Recent opinion surveys suggest that the party's support rate has fallen to only 3 percent of likely voters. He argued that the UDMR needed greater internal competition if the concept of a single ethnic Hungarian party was to work.

Views From Within the UDMR

¶4. (C) Marko resigned as Deputy Prime Minister on July 3, fulfilling a vow to take responsibility for the failed May 19 referendum President Basescu. Exit polls had indicated that a majority of UDMR voters had ignored Marko's urgings to vote against Basescu (reftel). Marko's foreign policy advisor, Kinga Tontsch, admitted that Senators Attila Verestoy and Peter Eckstein-Kovacs were developing separate factions within the UDMR. Tontsch described an embattled Marko as relying on a small group of loyalists including former IT

Minister Zsolt Nagy, Minister of Public Works Laszlo Borbely, and the UDMR's new Executive President Hunor Kelemen, but added that Marko "likes to be the one who makes the decisions in the party." She said that Hunor Kelemen is the first person that Marko has supported as a possible successor, and remarked that Kelemen is a "perfect copy" of Marko, sharing his opinions and even mannerisms.

¶ 15. (C) In a separate June 26 meeting, Senator Kovacs admitted that the minority government's collaboration with the Social Democrats was problematic. Every draft law was discussed with PNL and PSD and the PSD now had a chance to promote its laws, even at the cost of blowing the budget. Kovacs dismissed Marko as being a "symbolic vice premier" adding that the real problems were within the UDMR: "Marko is the old generation -- worn out." Eckstein said that Marko, along with Verestoy and Nagy, had problems with corruption and that the UDMR had not helped its public image by resisting anticorruption measures.

¶ 16. (C) Kovacs argued that Marko had "lost control" of his political base and predicted that if Tokes runs for European Parliament outside of the UDMR, the party would "lose the 5% threshold." He cited polls suggesting the UDMR would receive only 39% of votes from its traditional electoral base, while Tokes would get 22%, with 39% undecided. Kovacs said he preferred to see the UDMR's Executive Bureau opened up to political competition within the party, as currently, "there is no debate in the UDMR." He also argued that the party should open its doors for the people who left the UDMR.

Next Steps

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¶ 17. (C) Szilagyi said negotiations will continue August 9, headed by the two campaign managers, Keleman and himself. Szilagyi said he would press the UDMR to change the law on local elections that currently requires political parties not in parliament to gather 25,000 signatures in order to compete. This law prevented the Hungarian Civic Union (UCM) from competing in local elections in 2004 even though it had collected 8,500 signatures in one town that only had a population of 40,000 -- enough to win possibly half the seats on the town council. Szilagyi said a common candidate list was possible, but only if the UDMR took measures to open itself to internal competition, or at least agreed to a positive campaign aimed at mobilizing Hungarian voters to turn out for the election. He said that if there was no agreement on a common list, Tokes could throw his support behind Eckstein in the battle to succeed Marko.

¶ 18. (C) Regarding attempts by other political actors to affect internal UDMR dynamics, Szilagyi said that six ethnic Hungarian organizations had been active in campaigning against Basescu's impeachment and enjoyed good relations with the Democratic Party (PD). He opined that the PD's interest was in creating a more "democratic" UDMR rather than in supplanting the UDMR as the ethnic Hungarian party. Szilagyi also accused the Social Democrats (PSD), Liberals (PNL), and even the Greater Romania Party (PRM) of supporting the status quo within the UDMR.

¶ 19. (C) Szilagyi insisted that Tokes' campaign would focus on Szekeler autonomy, but insisted that it would not be "politically radical" -- i.e., that the focus would be on governance and the democratic process, rather than on sensitive matters such as the integrity of Romania's borders. Other issues included education and restitution matters. He noted that the ethnic Hungarian community could disappear from the Romanian scene, as it had shunk in the past 15 years by 250,000 to 1.4 million. Szilagyi, who recently returned from the U.S. on an international visitor grant focused on civic education, concluded that now was a good time for greater dialogue on ethnic issues, given the more stable

external environment provided by NATO and EU membership.

¶10. (C) Comment: A combination of factors--including demographic pressures and Marko's failed attempt to remove Basescu, as well as the re-emergence of the charismatic Tokes as an alternate locus of ethnic Hungarian support--now provides a unique challenge to the tight grip that Marko and his circle have exercised over ethnic Hungarian politics in Romania. The cards remain stacked in Marko's favor given the significant barriers to entry of new voices in ethnic politics. Another factor will be whether President Basescu will be willing to resist the temptation to meddle in ethnic politics, as he has done in the past. Basescu recently made a very public tour of majority ethnic Hungarian areas, pointing to the underdevelopment in health care, transportation, and other infrastructure areas. These remarks were widely interpreted as a pointed criticism of poor governance under Marko's leadership of the UDMR. End Comment.

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